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The Fashionable *New Yorker*: Style, Criticism, and the Dressed Body in Print

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Over twenty years ago, Colin McDowell (1994) lamented the lack of impartial, critical voices, seeing them as a necessary check against the frivolity of fashion designers' creative whims. McDowell argued, "One of the reasons the designer scam has been so easy is that there are no guidelines to tell *us*, the consumers, when we are being taken for a ride" (p. 33). Though certainly a noble pursuit, whether fashion criticism has ever served the role McDowell longed for is questionable. Criticism is a long-established craft in the realms of art and literature, and numerous tomes have questioned the critic and their outputs, each with a distinct construction of what criticism does, or should do. According to Gee (1993), the critic is an advocate, making art "intelligible" to an audience (p. 12). Pincus-Witten (1984), on the other hand, stated "In a certain sense, to make up an argument is what critics do" (p. 272). Elkins (2003) argued "good" criticism meets three criteria: (a) it makes an ambitious judgment that adds to a larger body of work on the subject; (b) it reflects on the judgement made; and (c) it is important enough to count as history and "builds the conversation" (p. 83-85). Berger (1998) stated, "The strongest criticism uses language and rhetoric not merely for descriptive or evaluative purposes but as a means of inspiration, provocation, emotional connection, and experimentation" (p. 11). Berger's definition outlined a literary form where the feeling and fantasy created by the author, not the subject or object of the criticism, is the real value. Returning to McDowell, what position might fashion criticism occupy in this range of objectives and outcomes?

Continuing the conversation started by McNeil and Miller (2014) in *Fashion Writing and Criticism*, I explore fashion criticism as meaning making to better situate it amongst other critical literary traditions in art, literature, film, and performance. As a first step in a larger project to explore the role and character of fashion writing in the *New Yorker*, I conducted a textual analysis on the ten most recent "Style Issues" which appear twice a year on the editorial calendar; one in fall and the other in spring. In his "Defense of Textual Analysis" Fürsich (2009) argued, "...media texts present a distinctive discursive moment between encoding and decoding that justifies special scholarly engagement" and ultimately "only independent textual analysis can elucidate the narrative structure, symbolic arrangements and ideological potential of media content" (p. 238- 239). The goal here was not a closely detailed lexical or rhetorical analysis of text but a broader sketch of the ideological frames through and by which *The New Yorker* constructed meaning for fashion (as both object and concept). This research builds on the work of scholars such as Kim (1998) and Van de Peer (2014) by expanding the analysis of critical writing into new sites of discourse and beyond the previous focus on affordances lost or gained by journalist, product, and/or designer. I argue that fashion criticism, through multi-author storytelling, serves to establish an underlining consistency to an otherwise enigmatic industry.

The New Yorker, launched in 1925, offers a unique context in which to explore fashion criticism and writing. In less than a decade after its launch, it emerged as "a fixture on the

American literary and cultural landscape” (Yagoda 2000, p. 56). Of further interest here is that its founder, Harold Ross, demanded “absolute separation between the business and editorial offices” (Travis 2000, p. 257) with the hopes of protecting content from the influence of advertisers. This is a useful counter to the accusation that cultural journalists are too entangled with the industries on which they report, undermining their credibility. Since its founding, the *New Yorker* has employed at least one journalist styled as “fashion critic,” including Lois Long, Kennedy Fraser, and Judith Thurman. While it is not a venue often considered under the heading “fashion media,” *The New Yorker*’s long history of positioning fashion reporting as of interest to their readership offers a new space in which to deconstruct how tangential, yet relevant, media spaces engage with this multifarious cultural product. *The New Yorker* established their model for fashion writing with the initial hiring of Long, who Ross described as “having simultaneously a strong knowledge of the subject, excellent taste, the good sense not to take it seriously, and the writing ability and wit to carry it all off in print.” (Yagoda 2000, p. 77).

The New Yorker engaged in a narrative of fashion culture. The “Style Issues” were exactly that: a sweeping narrative of the diverse and complex approaches to personal style. Profiles of designers like Iris Van Herpen challenged the notion presented by Van de Peer (2014) that fashion writing has abandoned fashion’s materiality in favor of “re-artification.” Though the “designer as artist” narrative is certainly present in these profiles, the process of production and centrality of materials was still heavily emphasized. True to the *New Yorker* character, there were also witticisms highlighting fashion’s absurdities. For example, in a profile of a new Patagonia retail outlet the author noted, “There are quilted down ‘sweaters’ perfect for an anorexic Michelin Man (\$200-\$329)” (Marx 2013, March 25, p. 34). Beyond the typical focus on high-profile brand names, the magazine was willing to engage subjects largely ignored by the mainstream fashion press. For example, a profile on Dapper Dan appeared in 2013, a year before the *New York Times* style section interviewed him and four years before the mainstream industry acknowledged his broader impact on street style. Most notably was the centrality of the body to many of the narratives included in the “Style Issues.” One particularly successful piece in this genre was a long-form, investigative story on a trans woman’s journey to feeling comfortable in her own skin through plastic surgery. These narratives illustrated how *The New Yorker* fashion writing practiced the nuances of Entwistle’s (2015) academic theory of the fashion/body interaction for a lay audience. Further exploration of the ways in which *The New Yorker* connected fashion to human experience will be expanded upon in the paper.

When considering the various goals of criticism outlined by Gee, Pincus-Witten, Elkins, and Berger *The New Yorker* approach aligned most closely with Berger’s prescription. The magazine’s literary/narrative approach was less about offering assessment and more concerned with creating an emotional connection for the reader. Though style and fashion served as a frame of reference, emphasis remained on the human experience as related to fashion. While the discursive site warrants further analysis, this first step into the fashionable *New Yorker* has opened a new avenue in which to explore fashion writing as a literary genre that, while aware of the whims of the industry, connects the body, fashion, and the human experience.

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